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A Night at Sea.

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[Read before the Northern Division of the Cooper Orn. Club, Sept. 2 1899.]

WHAT do the sea birds do at night? I have often heard the question asked and as often heard someone answer: "Oh, they all go to the islands to roost." Do they? Few naturalists care to spend the hours wandering about on land in hopes of discovering unpublished chapters in the life histories of our land birds, and on the water they are not only less inclined but opportunities are few and far between.

I have often passed the night with the birds off the California coast and enjoyed their company so much that I venture to give an account of one night's observations in hope that it may prove of some interest to readers of the BULLETIN. It was late in April when a visit to the Coronado Islands was planned, and as it was desirable to spend several days about the islands, I did not care to take a large boat that would have to be anchored off the rocks. Therefore a fifteen-foot skiff was loaded with camp equipage and provisions and at dark I started—alone, —because, as some one said, no one was fool enough to go with me and at night. Since it is nearly always calm then off our Southern California Coast and with nearly the full moon, it was altogether the most enjoyable time for the twenty-two mile pull to the islands.

On each of the beacons which mark the channel up San Diego Bay were resting cormorants or herons. Two or three Great Blue Herons and one Egret were seen, some crowding so close to the red light as to seem to be seeking warmth from its rays. At Ballast Point I hauled the boat upon the beach to wait the turning of the tide. Out in the channel scores of Brown Pelicans were busily engaged fishing in a close flock. So fast did they plunge it seemed to rain pelicans. They were accompanied by the omnipresent Heermann's Gulls whose whining, cat-like cries were the only notes to be heard. Between midnight and one o'clock, the tide having turned, I launched the skiff and started sea-ward. A few Western Gulls were the first birds seen. They were passing from the bay toward the kelp beds two miles to the westward.

These vast reaches of thick kelp afford excellent resting places for the gulls, terns and cormorants, and even Great Blue Herons are often seen standing on the floating mass. One arose now as I approached and flew farther out with hoarse complaint. Skirting the edge of the kelp for some two or three miles, gulls were constantly startled from their roosting places, Western and Heermann's being easily recognized. At

intervals small flocks of Royal Terns rose from the rafts of broad leaves and others were at times seen flying in from the south. Quite a number of cormorants were fishing near the southern end of the kelp, diving for the many small fish that could easily be traced through the water by their silvery, phosphorescent trails. On one or two occasions the birds chased their prey under the skiff and the larger track of phosphorescence resembled a singularly erratic comet, as it zigzagged about, three or four fathoms under water.

It was here that one of the cormorants in pursuit of a flying fish chased it out of the water so near the boat that the fish passed within a few inches of my face, and the bird, rising to the surface an instant later, was so startled by the sudden discovery of the boat, it uttered a squawk of horror which was drowned in a gurgle as its author hastily disappeared below. A cormorant never tries to fly when it is in a hurry and can as easily dive. After leaving the kelp and getting fairly out to sea, gulls were rather common, flying in small flocks of three or four to a dozen. Nearly all were migrating and many were accompanied by Royal Terns. A whistle would always call the terns aside from their line of flight but after one or two circuits and a few inquiring cries, they left the boat to pass on to the north.

Frequently flocks of six or eight pelicans would pass like grey ghosts in the moonlight, flying in "pelican order," each just behind and a little to one side of the one preceding it. They but cleared the water, rising and falling in perfect time to skim the long, smooth swell. They were all coming from the direction of the bay and flying toward the islands in a grave, business-like manner that ever marks the species as one that takes life seriously. When deep water was reached several miles from shore, the call notes of Cassin's Auklets and Xantus' Murrelets began to be heard and soon they came from

all sides, although none allowed me to get near enough to see them. At this season the murrelets have nearly all hatched their young and taken them to sea, where family parties of two adults and one or two downy young are often seen, many miles from land.

The auklets, however, though they have also hatched, are obliged to spend the night in getting food for the young which never leave the burrows until they are fully feathered. They are never fed in the daytime but at night an auklet colony presents a very busy appearance as the adults hurry in from the sea, where they have spent the day.

All night they are going and coming and some of them must go many miles from home and make perhaps several trips each night to satisfy the cravings of the ever-hungry squabs. Soon after reaching the auklets, shearwaters were seen flashing by in the moonlight and the frequent, discordant cries that reached me proclaimed them to be, in part at least, the Black-vented species. Now and then the far-off notes of a petrel came over the waves and once the dark, bat-like form of what was probably the Black Petrel hovered for a moment in the wake of the skiff and was gone.

It was now getting grey in the east and the islands were no longer blue lumps on the sea but unmistakable, rough, rocky mountains but a short distance to the south. But a few minutes since a flock of pelicans passed, going toward the nesting colony on North Island and now a long line of them are seen coming back,—the first contingent of hundreds that soon start for the day's fishing. They are followed by a long, black line that, as it comes nearer, resolves itself into a seemingly endless column of Farallone Cormorants. As day breaks, pelicans, gulls and cormorants become more and more abundant, streaming out from the island in every direction, until we can easily understand how one, seeing them arrive or depart, comes to the conclusion that "all the sea birds go the islands to roost."